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What is the Pentecostal Church and What Do Pentecostals Believe?

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The Pentecostal Church is a dynamic and rapidly growing branch of the Christian faith that has had a major influence on Christianity around the world. Pentecostalism emerged from humble beginnings in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but has now become one of the most significant expressions of Christianity globally.

At the core of Pentecostalism is a passionate focus on the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostals believe that after someone becomes a Christian, they should have a special experience of being "baptized" or filled with the Holy Spirit. This baptism of the Holy Spirit is believed to be evidenced by the supernatural ability to speak in unknown *"tongues"* - languages that the person has not learned. This distinctive belief about the Holy Spirit baptism sets Pentecostals apart from many other Christian traditions and has shaped Pentecostal theology and practices.

The origins of the Pentecostal movement can be traced to a few key events and figures. In 1901, a Christian teacher named Charles Parham was leading a Bible school in Topeka, Kansas. During a prayer meeting at the school, one of Parham's students named Agnes Ozman reportedly began speaking in tongues - an event that is widely regarded as the birth of modern Pentecostalism. A few years later, another hugely influential event was the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles, led by the African-American preacher William Seymour. From 1906 to 1915, Seymour's Azusa Street mission experienced remarkable displays of spiritual gifts like tongues, healings, and prophetic messages, which then spread Pentecostal teachings across the United States and around the world.

The early Holiness believers recognized that Christianity ought to result in visible changes in a person's life. The focus of many early prayer meetings was to "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles" (Hebrews 12:1). These earnest believers wanted to run their race faithfully and were seeking God's help to do so. As that earnestness gave way to emotional religious fervor, doctrines were developed to explain and support the emotions and experiences. For many today, the emphasis is on the excitement, the experience, or the new word of prophecy. Some of the questionable foundations laid by John Wesley (e.g., a second blessing of perfection) paved the way for later Pentecostal doctrines of new works of the Spirit. Some Pentecostals allow experience to trump scriptural teaching and attempt to conform Scripture to what they "*know by experience*." But fervent experience, even when it involves miracles, is not the test of true faith (see Matthew 7:22–23). Peter affirmed the value of Scripture over experience when he said, "We also have a more sure Word of prophecy, to which you do well to take heed, as to a light that shines in a dark place" (2 Peter 1:19).

Within the larger Pentecostal movement, there are several distinct sub-groups or categories that have emerged over time:

- **Classical Pentecostals** - These are the earliest Pentecostal denominations, such as the Assemblies of God and Church of God, which trace their origins directly back to the Azusa Street revival. They place a strong emphasis on the baptism of the Holy Spirit evidenced by speaking in tongues.
- **Charismatic Renewal** - Starting in the 1960s, a *"charismatic"* movement emerged within mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches. Charismatics embraced Pentecostal-style spiritual experiences but remained part of their traditional denominations. This movement helped to spread Pentecostal beliefs and practices more widely.
- **Neo-Pentecostals or Independent Charismatics** - These are Pentecostal-style churches and movements that are not officially affiliated with the classical Pentecostal denominations. Examples include the Vineyard movement and many non-denominational charismatic churches. They have often been more theologically diverse and innovative compared to the classical Pentecostal groups.
- **Oneness Pentecostals** - Also known as *"Apostolic"* or *"Jesus Only"* Pentecostals, this group rejects the traditional Christian doctrine of the Trinity (three persons in one God) in favor of a unitary view of God. They also teach that baptism must be done using only the name of Jesus, rather than the traditional Trinitarian formula. This theological distinctiveness has separated them from other Pentecostal and charismatic streams.

Despite these diverse expressions, Pentecostals share several core theological beliefs:

- **Salvation Experience** - Pentecostals emphasize a personal, life-changing experience of salvation, involving repentance, faith in Jesus Christ, and the forgiveness of sins. They often talk about being "*born again*" or experiencing a *"second blessing"* of deeper commitment and holiness.
- **Spirit Baptism** - Pentecostals believe that after becoming a Christian, believers should seek a special "*baptism*" or *"infilling"* of the Holy Spirit, which is evidenced by speaking in tongues and other spiritual gifts. This "*second blessing*" experience is seen as crucial for empowering Christian living and ministry.
- **Supernatural Manifestations** - Pentecostals expect ongoing supernatural activity of the Holy Spirit, including healing miracles, prophecies, and diverse kinds of tongues. These "*charismatic*" spiritual gifts are viewed as normal and normative for the contemporary church.
- **Experiential Christianity** - Pentecostalism is characterized by a highly emotional and experiential approach to the Christian life, with a focus on direct, personal encounters with the divine. Pentecostal worship services are typically more spontaneous and expressive compared to more formal, liturgical traditions.

While Pentecostals share these common themes, it is important to note that there is significant diversity within the movement. Beliefs and practices can vary widely between different Pentecostal denominations and independent churches.

Some Pentecostal teachings and practices have been the subject of theological debate and controversy. For example, the doctrine of a *"second blessing"* of Spirit baptism distinct from salvation has been questioned by many non-Pentecostal Christians. The requirement of tongues as the sole evidence of Spirit baptism also appears to contradict the biblical presentation of tongues as one of many spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4-11).

In addition, some or many Pentecostal and charismatic movements have embraced the "prosperity gospel" - the idea that financial wealth and physical health are direct results of strong faith and right standing with God. Prominent prosperity gospel preachers, like Kenneth Copeland and Creflo Dollar, have been criticized for exploiting their followers and creating an unhealthy fixation on material blessings. The prosperity gospel's emphasis on obtaining earthly riches and comfort through faith has been a source of much controversy and debate within the broader Pentecostal/charismatic world. This teaching contradicts biblical principles, as Jesus warned against storing up treasures on earth (Matthew 6:19-20), and Paul noted that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10). Jesus also highlighted the spiritual dangers of wealth (Matthew 19:24), while James reminded believers that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith (James 2:5). By prioritizing wealth, prosperity gospel preachers divert attention from the true essence of the Christian faith, which is rooted in love, humility, and service to others.

Another area of concern within certain Pentecostal/charismatic circles is the phenomenon of "syncretism" - the blending of Christian teachings with unbiblical beliefs and practices from other religious traditions. Some Pentecostal groups, especially in parts of the Global South, have been accused of incorporating folk magic, spiritism, and occult elements into their theology and rituals. This syncretism can lead to a dilution of core Christian doctrines and the adoption of heterodox beliefs and practices. Scripture warns against such blending, as Paul cautioned the Corinthians, "*What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?*" (2 Corinthians 6:15, NIV). Additionally, Moses warned the Israelites, "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it" (Deuteronomy 4:2, NKJV). This underscores the importance of maintaining the purity of Christian doctrine, free from the influence of non-Christian beliefs.

Additionally, the Pentecostal/charismatic movement has sometimes been plagued by "hyper-charismatic" excesses, where the pursuit of spiritual experiences and miraculous manifestations has taken precedence over sound doctrine and godly living. Abuses like false prophecies, bizarre manifestations, and unhealthy spiritual manipulation have occasionally marred the reputation of the movement. Extreme forms of charismatic excess can distort the true purpose of the spiritual gifts and lead to spiritual deception and harm. Paul warned against such excesses, advising believers to test all things and hold fast to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Furthermore, he emphasized that God is a God of order, not confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33), and that spiritual gifts should be exercised in love and edification of the church (1 Corinthians 14:26). Therefore, prioritizing sensational experiences over biblical truth can lead to spiritual harm and mislead believers from true godliness.

Ultimately, Pentecostalism has had a profound impact on global Christianity, catalyzing a vibrant renewal of charismatic spirituality. However, like any theological tradition, Pentecostal teachings must be carefully evaluated in light of the Bible. The true test of a believer's faith is not the presence of extraordinary experiences, but faithfulness to God's revealed Word in Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17). While the Pentecostal movement has undoubtedly contributed much to the vibrancy of contemporary Christianity, it must also guard against theological error, spiritual excess, and unbiblical practices that can undermine the gospel message. The balance of biblical truth and Spirit-empowered living remains the ideal for which Pentecostals and all Christians should strive.

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